

UBUNTU THEOLOGY & THE CHURCH FOYER

by Craig Wong

Up until this past year, a first-timer visiting our church building during midweek office hours would have to take a shot at which button to press at the entrance... and hope that pushing it would actually have an effect. Fortunate guests might then hear a garbled, barely decipherable voice emanating from a speaker, explaining how to manipulate the door open. If successful, he or she would make it into the foyer, a long, dark hallway with no human being in sight. Once at the end of the corridor, the visitor again had to make a best guess: Do I make a right or a left? Do I go up the stairs? Is anybody here? Thankfully, a friendly face would usually, eventually, be found.

Ironically, parallels can be drawn to my experience visiting a congregational friend held at an immigration detention facility, located within the Yuba County Jail about 100 miles from San Francisco. Finding the entrance was just the beginning. Apparently worried about cakes with embedded nail files, security imposed meticulous and time-consuming protocols. Once I was able to see a detention officer, I was permitted to converse with my friend—with muted voice through the ultra-thick medium of a bullet-proof encasement. Even more impersonal was the process of ascertaining my friend's deportation status. I was sent upstairs to a windowless and entirely empty room, with the exception of one vintage dial phone mounted on the wall. Upon picking it up, I was immediately referred to some geographically distant office, followed by another. The runaround was stunning. And no friendly face was to be found that day.

Dr. Timothy Gorrige, whom I had the privilege of meeting at the University of Virginia, likes to talk about the "theology of the built environment," an exegesis of physical spaces that embody, or distort, the character and purposes of

God. Put another way, planned environments can serve to either re-humanize or de-humanize its occupants. Such analysis can be applied to any place inhabited by people, whether there voluntarily or not. While in Virginia, for instance, Gorrige helped us astutely exegete Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's beautiful country home that physically segregated his slaves in a basement-level dwelling—a striking example of structurally engineered human division by race and class.

For many churches of the emergent variety, it's trendy to draw from the notion of the "third place," popularized by the work of sociologist Ray Oldenburg, who posits that beyond one's domicile and workplace, healthy democratic societies need spaces where people can meet, share ideas, and build relationships

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with strangers. Of all institutions, the coffee shop or English pub best exemplifies this concept. Indeed, it was Oldenburg's theories that CEO Howard Schultz grafted onto, eventually to become the philosophical backbone of Starbucks' staggering success. Arguably, the evangelical church has taken its cues from

America's caffeine empire, making coffee bars and internet cafés an article of faith in the design formulae of sanctuary spaces everywhere.

Although I, too, find the conversation about "church as third place" a stimulating one, I've been more intrigued of late by the Ubuntu theology that Bishop Desmond Tutu, in particular, first introduced to Western Christians in his 1999 book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*. Although a precise definition of Ubuntu is probably hard to come by, a Liberian once put it succinctly in this way: "I am, because of who we all are." In other words, contrary to the hardened sensibilities of American hyper-individualism, the Ubuntu ethic assumes that one's identity, meaning, and purpose are inextricably tied to the whole. I do not—indeed cannot—exist apart from you. My welfare is tied up with yours. Ubuntu theology is fundamentally a Trinitarian theology: I am a communal being because I was created in the image of a communal God.

Which brings me back to my church's foyer. As a result of recently completed building renovations, our foyer has been transformed into what we've come to affectionately refer to as our "courtyard," a nice open space pregnant with possibilities to invite, welcome, and gather human beings into contact with one another. In this space, we can envision the breadth of neighbors from every possible walk of life—laborers and landlords, lawyers and launderers, pizza makers and principals, homeless and homeowners, believers and unbelievers—experiencing the rare encounter where shared humanity and a profound interdependence is rediscovered. With the Holy Spirit at work, with or without the aroma of a Sumatran blend wafting about the room, we will marvel at what the Father, through Jesus Christ, is ultimately about doing in the world...reuniting the Trinity's scattered, rebellious, yet lonely children back together again for the glory of God. ✚



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